

# Women in Pictures. A Dance Iconography of Gender Transformations

Eleni Filippidou

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to observe the attitude of the woman in the dance through iconography. In particular, the present study, through the observation of images from the community of Nea Vyssa in Thrace in Greece, aims to highlight the structure of gender relations in the society of this community over time. The data collection was based on secondary sources. More specifically, the data collection was carried out based on the principles of historical archival research. For the analysis of the data dance iconography will be used. However, having visual components, dance shares a representative quality with the visual arts. So, in addition, the pictures of women dance in this study will be analyzed under the terms of visual anthropology. Finally, the interpretation of the data was held with the anthropological thinking about gender identity as it appears in anthropological views of dance and particularly in Hanna. From the data analysis was found that the position of women in dance evolved significantly over time, as did the society of Nea Vyssa, which from patriarchal, today became an equal society. So through dance iconography one can study various parameters that exist in dance and which Seebas (1991) also mentioned, however, through dance iconography one can study social stereotypes, gender discriminations and social structures and therefore issues that have to do with the evolution of society over time.

**Keywords:** Dance iconography, Gender relations, Greek Traditional Dance, Visual anthropology, Woman identity.

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**E. Filippidou\***

School of Physical Education and Sport  
Science, National and Kapodistrian  
University of Athens, Greece  
(e-mail: filipele@phed.uoa.gr)

*\*Corresponding Author*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The research field of this paper is the region of Greek Thrace. In particular, the research paper refers to the community of Nea Vyssa in the prefecture of Evros, a community in which the researcher was born and raised. The researcher took her first research steps in this community, in which she conducted research from 2004 to 2017 with repeated visits to the field, at least twice each year. Many research reports emerged from her research, which discussed various topics, such as local dance identity, the construction of national identity through dance, the transformation in dance, gender relations through dance, etc.

In addition to conducting field research, through interviews and participant observation, the researcher also collected secondary material from the field, such as videos of dance events of the community, photographs which date from 1900 to 2017, personal notes of residents on the history of the community, but also notes of lyrics songs and carols, as well as old books that refer to the community.

Looking at the secondary sources, three photographs from different time periods came to the attention of the researcher, which depicted women in the first place of the dance and in which the women maintained different postures in their bodies. This fact gained the interest of the researcher. Does the different posture of the body in different periods of time want to tell us something?

Dance, as an embodied language (Isari, 2011; Filippidou, 2023 c,d), is the means of expressing emotions through a series of culturally defined dance patterns. By adopting these defined dance patterns, the individual joins a specific cultural system, accepts the identity of this cultural system and emits symbols as a member of it (Gyftoulas, 2003). This results in the individual's physical body turning into a social body and expressing the social life of each region and each era. In other words, ideologies, beliefs, stereotypes, but also the relationships of individuals and genders are reflected in the dance.

However, the dance does not remain stable, but transforms according to the changes that occur in the social structures of the community (Filippidou, 2006, 2010, 2023a). Dance, therefore, receives the influences and stimuli of the social context, within which it develops and evolves. So does the different body posture have something to do with the transformation of the dance over time? Does the posture of the body reflect the evolution of social structures and by extension the position of women in the society of Nea Vyssa?

These concerns could be clarified through interviewing the informants. However, the first generation refugee residents of the community are no longer alive to provide us with information. Could the photos therefore 'speak' and give us the information we need?

According to Seebas (1991), a picture can be useful in the studies of dance, because "a) it represents a dance position; b) it represents a synchronic summary of a succession of movements; c) it depicts physical expressions of emotion; d) it represents concretely o concept of dance, such as the Dance of Death; e) it represents, symbolically or abstractly, the idea of dance; f) it portrays a dancer, in action or as a sitter; g) it includes elements related to dance, such as the costume, headdress, or objects held; h) it depicts the physical location (dance floor, stage, ball house, etc.), where dance takes place" (p. 34).

Based on the aforementioned, the aim of this paper is to observe the attitude of the woman in the dance through iconography (Seebas, 1991). In particular, the present study, through the observation of images, aims to highlight the structure of gender relations in the society of Nea Vyssa Evros over time.

## II. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the aim of the paper, the collection of data was based on secondary sources. Secondary sources refer to the review and use of the existing literature and were based on the principles of archival ethnography (Gkefou-Madianou, 1999; Stocking, 1992) and historical research (Adshead & Layson 1998; Thomas, & Nelson 2002). In addition, these secondary sources also include photos collected by the community.

For the analysis of the data dance iconography (Seebas, 1991; Shifrin, 1984) will be used. Dance iconography is a "...discipline between choreology and art history [...] and this kind of research has parallels in the study of notated dance, archival and literary evidence, and notated music..." (Seebas, 1991, p. 33). However, having visual components, dance shares a representative quality with the visual arts (Seebas, 1991). So, in addition, the pictures of women dance in this study will be analyzed under the terms of visual anthropology (Mead, 1974; Mead, & Metraux, 1953), which is a specialized study of culture involving photographs, films and videos. Visual anthropology includes the study of both the human being captured by the image and the image of the person being photographed (Srivastava, 2022). According to Jacknins (1994) visual anthropology includes the production and analysis of still photographs, the study of art and material culture, and the analysis of gestures, facial expressions and spatial aspects of behavior and interaction. For the comparison of the data, the comparative method was used (Ogurtsov, 1983).

Finally, the interpretation of the data was held with the anthropological thinking about gender identity as it appears in anthropological views of dance and particularly in Hanna. (1987, 1988). This is a theoretical model that sees the perception of gender as a field of negotiation, cultural symbol or social relation (Strathern, 1976, 1988; Papataxiarchis, 1992), as well as an analysis criterion of the local population (Papataxiarchis, 1992).

## III. THE SOCIETY OF NEA VYSSA

In the dance there are some elements that a priori escape depiction (Seebas, 1991). For this reason and for the best interpretation of the depictions, we should turn to historical, folkloric and other sources in order to make a reference to the history and structure of the society of Nea Vyssa. Nea Vyssa is in the northeast lowlands of Greece, south of the old Greek town of Edirne (Adrianoupoli), which now belongs to Turkey (Filippidou 2010, 2018), with a population of 900 residents. The residents are descendants of refugees of Bosna or Vosnohori of Bosnohori which was situated a few kilometers northeast of Edirne in Turkey (Maraslis, 2007).

Bosna was a multicultural community as they inhabited it families that arrived there from different corners of the Ottoman Empire, such as Adrianoupoli, Filippoupoli, Chios, Varna, Saranta Ekklesies, Asia minor, Kappadokia, Pontus and other areas (Maraslis, 2007). These ethnic groups altogether created the community of Bosna (Filippidou, 2006, 2010).

Most of these communities were located either in Eastern Thrace (today's Turkish Thrace), or in Cappadocia and the coasts of Asia Minor (which today belong to Turkey). These regions are dominated by patriarchy, due to their influences from the East (Tsibiridou, 2006). For this reason, the community of Nea Vyssa was also patriarchal (Filippidou, 2022), a fact that was noticeable by the way the two sexes danced.

In the traditional society of Nea Vyssa "...the dominant gender [...] are the men, who are the main driving force within the family and are the only ones who have a say in decision-making, concerning the family. This fact can be seen both from the way of performing their dance, which is improvisationally free throughout the body, and from the place of their dance which is the public space..." (Filippidou, 2022, p. 843).

On the contrary, women they appear as weak and passive 'objects' in the concrete social system and are possessed of humility, modesty and shame. This fact is evident from the way they perform their dance. Their dance is a) improvisationally limited, b) smoothly, without twisting and bending of the torso..." (Filippidou, 2022, p. 843).

However, the modern society of Nea Vyssa has unhooked from the influence of the East and westernized, with the result that today women "... appear to have a leading and dominant role in all customary and dancing occasions. Thus, today the female gender no longer appears subordinate to men, but acquires more freedom, becomes independent and disputes male dominance..." (Filippidou, & Bouna-Vaila, 2023).

#### IV. THE WOMEN IN DANCE PICTURES

The three photographs under study depict women dancing outdoors in the community of Nea Vyssa, at different time periods. The first photo dates to the 1940s (Pic. 1), shortly after World War II, the second to the 1960s (Pic. 2) and the third to 2000 (Pic. 3). In the last two photos (Pic. 2,3) the same woman is depicted in the first position of the dance, while in the first photo (Pic. 1) her sister-in-law is in the first position of the dance, while she follows in the rear.

In all three photographs circular dances are depicted, as the dancers link together holding each other and studying the component elements of the circular dance repertoire of Nea Vyssa (Table I), it is concluded that the dance depicted is the 7/8 Syrtos (Kalamatianos).

TABLE I: THE DANCES OF NEA VYSSA

Dances	Dancers	Form	Space	Tempo	Music accompaniment	Function
<i>Syrtos (stavrotos)</i>	Women	Open circle	Outdoor	Slow to moderate	Song without music	Dance events at the village square
<i>7/8 Syrtos</i>	Men Women	Open circle	Outdoor	Moderate	Song with music	In all dance occasions
<i>Aligournos</i>	Men Women	Open circle	Outdoor	Fast	Song with music	In all dance occasions
<i>Kasapikos</i>	Men Women	Open circle	Outdoor	Moderate to fast	Song with music	In all dance occasions
<i>Sympithera havasou</i>	Men Women	Open circle	Outdoor	Moderate	Song with music	Weddings
<i>Karsilamas</i>	Men Women	Face to face dance	Indoor	Moderate	Song with music	Weddings and family dance events (Balos)
<i>Varys gissios</i>	Women	Face to face dance	Indoor	Slow	Music without song	Weddings and family dance events (Balos)
<i>Ayntinkous</i>	Men Women	Face to face dance	Indoor	Slow to moderate	Music without song	Weddings
<i>Pidichtos</i>	Men Women	Face to face dance	Outdoor	Fast	Music without song	Dances of <i>agermos</i>
<i>Arapikos</i>	Men	Face to face dance	Indoor	Slow	Music without song	Imitative dances
Dance of <i>kavrama</i> and <i>dirmoniou</i>	Men	Face to face dance	Outdoor	Slow	Song with music	Imitative dances, Threshing floor dances

Filippidou, Koutsouba, & Tyrovola, 2021, p. 37.

This fact emerges from the study of the overall image of the community's dance. On this basis the ritual "...wedding dance Sympithera havasou, which is performed exclusively on the wedding eve along with the custom called Kna..." (Filippidou, Koutsouba, & Tyrovola, 2021, p. 42) cannot be in the picture because has "...different function and significance..." (p. 42). This is also confirmed by the fact that in the Sympithera havasou dance, the first person in the dance "...holding in his/her right hand the sacred object of the ceremony..." (Filippiou, Koutsouba, Lalioti, & Lantzios, 2019, p. 18) which has "... three lit candles..." (p. 18), a fact that is not depicted in any of the three photographs.

Also, it could not be the Syrtos (stavrotos or zonaradikos) dance, as the grip of this dance "...was cross (X) with slightly bent elbows. The dancers were caughting with their hands crossed..." (Filippidou, 2010, p. 68), but neither was Kasapikos, as "...he was especially loved by the men, without this meaning that women did not take part in the dance as well. However, the inhabitants of Nea Vyssa report that when the musical instruments "were performing" Kasapikos, usually the women stopped dancing and only the men danced..." (p. 78).

However, the photos could depict the Aligournos dance, as "...its dance form is similar to that of Syrtos (Kalamatianos) with the difference that the dance movements were faster and slightly jumpier..." (Filippidou, 2010, p. 72). On the basis of what has been mentioned, we come to the conclusion that in all

three photographs 7/8 Syrtos (Kalamatianos) is depicted, who was "...the dance with which any dance events opened and closed..." (Filippidou, 2010, p. 70) and "...is considered as one of the most basic dances of the dance repertoire of the community..." (Filippidou, & Karfis, 2022, p. 83).



Pic. 1. Women in dance at the decade of 1940.

The first photo (Pic. 1) shows a group of women of various ages dancing. Little girls can be seen in the back seats of the dance, while older women are in the front seats. As the picture "...includes elements related to dance, such as the costume..." (Seebas, 1991, p.34), in this photo are given information through the costumes of the dancers, both about their age, the placing them in the dance circle and the dance occasion.

The first woman wears the wedding dress of the community (Filippidou, 2010, p. 230), but without a veil. Wedding dresses, without a veil "...were wore until the age of thirty-five, at Easter and Christmas. After thirty-five they wore them again at the weddings of their children and their close relatives, but with black lace..." (Georgoulis, 1997, p. 72).

Also, in official clothing "...free women up to the age of thirty-five and brides (and for five years after marriage) ..." (Filippidou, 2010, p. 55) "...decorated the head with the 'gougo', a kind of hairstyle of the head, symbolizing a garden in bloom..." (Filippidou, 2010, p. 54.). This hairstyle has by the third woman in the dance, while the first has a 'gotsa' on her head. After the age of about thirty-five, they replaced the 'gougo' with the 'gotsa', a type of head covering..." (Filippidou, 2023b, p. 33).

Also, in the photo we find the absence of the male gender. In Nea Vyssa usually "the men did not dance much, but watched the women dance..." (Filippidou, 2023b, p. 81). Another element captured in the photograph concerns the connection of the hands. We find that the women are held by the palms with bent elbows, while a handkerchief is inserted between their handles, just as in the right hand of the first woman in the dance. This fact is also confirmed by the literature, according to which the women "... always held a folded handkerchief in their right hand..." (Filippidou, 2010, p. 70), as well as the "... first dancer. she had her hand loosely stretched downwards, holding a folded handkerchief..." (Filippidou, 2010, p. 72). A last but not least element has to do with the style of the women in the dance. The women in the photo perform the dance with small steps, their hands are in a closed position low and in front of the body, while the woman in the first position of the dance has her gaze lowered.

Based on the above, it is established that the first image 'speaks' and reveals important information about the time period in which it was taken. First, the period of time in which the dance is performed, the age of the dancers and the structure of their placement in the dance circle are established. The above is confirmed by the costume of the dancers, as we see: a) the first dancer wearing the bridal costume, but with white lace and 'gotsa' on her head, which indicates that she is over thirty-five years old and newly married, b) the absence black lace on the wedding dress, the short sleeve of the second dancer's dress and the absence of an overcoat also testify to the time of year the photo was taken, which seems to be Easter, c) the headband of the third dancer in a row reveals the way in which the dancers were placing in the circle, with the older ones preceding and the younger ones following, a fact that can also be seen from the positioning of the little girls at the end of the dance.

Finally, an important element revealed in the photograph is the position of women in the society of Nea Vyssa and their relations with the male sex. The absence of men from the dance, who were confined to the



position of spectator, indicates the power exercised by men in the traditional society of Nea Vyssa over women. The position of the observer does not simply indicate the men's unwillingness to dance, but has to do with it every sense of the word 'observer', which means 'one who examines systematically', in the sense of not deviating from the established model of woman. This model wants the woman to be humble, modest and shy (Charitonidis, & Tyrovola, 2010; Filippidou, 2022).

Another characteristic that reflects the relations of the two sexes and is depicted in the photograph concerns the movements of the dancers. From the photos it can be seen that these are small, which is also true of the handle, which is in a closed shape. The above shows the modesty that characterizes the women of this era, while the handkerchief they hold in their right hand is an obstacle to physical contact in the event that a man is next to them, so that they can protect their honor. According to Filippidou (2023b) "... In the hand the women of Nea Vyssa always held a folded embroidered handkerchief with lace on its edges. [...]. This took place to protect themselves if they came into contact at the dance with an unrelative, male person..." (p. 33). The humility, modesty and shame that possessed the woman of this period is depicted in the low gaze of the first woman at the dance, but also in the low position of her hand, in contrast to that of the men who have their hands in a high position. "...while they keep the dance rhythm by tapping their fingers..." (Filippidou, 2022, p. 843).



Pic. 2. Woman in dance at the decade of 1960.

Regarding the second photo (Pic. 2), this one depicts a woman doing a round dance in the 1960s. This woman appears to be older than the women in the first photo, as studying her costume, it can be seen that she has a black 'fakioli' on her head. The black 'fakioli' was worn by older women and in dancing occasions, not so formal (Filippidou, 2023b). So, it is likely that the photo was taken at a community festival. The differences with the previous time period are obvious. First of all, in this photo we have a male presence, which is evident both in the dance and outside of the dance. The male gender, whether dancing or observing, is depicted as rewarding the woman's dance, a fact that is perceived by the smile on the face of the two men in the photo and by the clapping of one of them.

The photo also shows the position of the dancers in the dance circle. In the previous time period the dancers were placing in the dance circle "...with the men leading and the women always following according to their age. The oldest in front and the youngest behind. The last man and the first woman in line had to be related to some way so that they could be held hand in hand and the man would live permanently in the community. Otherwise this fact was condemning by the local community of Nea Vyssa..." (Filippidou, 2020, p. 57–58). It was, therefore, inconceivable that women should precede men in dance. However, in this photo is depicting the woman in the first position of the dance and the man to following.

The movement of the woman seems to have greater freedom, compared to the previous period, a fact that is perceived by the placement of her hands. In particular, her hands are in a high position, without holding a handkerchief, and her right hand is no longer low, but rests on her waist, rising from the low to the middle level. However, despite the relative freedom of the woman's body, her gaze remains low, as in the first photo, however, her facial expression is not sullen, but happy, and this is shown by the smile on her face.

We find important information also emerges from the second photo. It seems that the position of women in the society of Nea Vyssa is being upgraded during this period. Her greater freedom of movement, her placement in the first place of the dance, in front of the men, and the rewarding of her dance by the men, prove that she is no longer under the hegemony of men. However, her lowered gaze, which is a sign of humility, modesty and shame, continues to exist, which proves that even in this period women continue to be considered subordinate and under the "possession" of men, having nevertheless marked important independence steps.



Pic. 3. Women in dance in 2000.

Finally, in the third photo (Pic. 3) in the first place of the dance is the same woman as in the second photo. Observing the photo, we find that she wears the traditional costume of Nea Vyssa, while the other dancers wear western-style clothes. Both the traditional costume and the western style clothes are casual and seeing the place where the dance takes place, which is the courtyard of a house, it can be concluded that the dancing occasion is not about a formal social event, but rather a family celebration.

In this photo, five women, of various ages, are depicted in front of the man. This fact shows that in the time period when the photo was taken, the position of women in the dance became equal to that of men, as women are now in the first positions of the dance and men are interposed between them. Also, now age does not play an important role in the placement of dancers in the dance circle, as, as we see in the photo, all ages dance mixed.

In women's body movement, improvisation now occupies an important place, a fact that was reprehensible in earlier periods of time. The improvisational freedom of the women is established by the high position of the first dancer's hands in contrast to the two previous time periods, where her hands were in the low and middle positions respectively. Also, the first dancer in the photo is not holding the hand of the second dancer in the row. From this is inferred that she is preparing to perform a turn around her torso. In Nea Vyssa "improvisation was a dominant component of the dances, especially among the men, who very often performed turns around the axis of the body, as well as was kicking the feet on the ground. The women were more restrained and they improvised only in face to face dances, where [...] they performed turns, always with restraint..." (Filippidou, 2010, p. 203). But even in this case "...their hands move in front of the face, as if trying to hide it..." (Filippidou, 2022, p. 843). Also, note that even the gaze of the first woman in the dance, at this time, is no longer lowered, but looks forward and smiles, like the other women participating in the dance. Therefore, like her body, so also her gaze, during this period of time she gained freedom.

Finally, it is established that during the time period when the photo was taken, women participate equally in the dance with men, and many times even dominate in the dance, entering the first positions of it. During this period, they acquire the same improvisational freedom as men, and their raised gaze proves that the patriarchy that used to exist in Nea Vyssa no longer exists.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this paper was to observe the attitude of the woman in the dance through iconography (Seebas, 1991). In particular, the present study, through the observation of images, had an aim to highlight the structure of gender relations in the society of Nea Vyssa Evros over time. In order to initially achieve the aim of the research, the data were based on secondary sources, including photos collected by the community. Dance iconography (Seebas, 1991; Shifrin, 1984) was used, under the terms of visual anthropology (Mead, 1974; Mead, & Metraux, 1953), in order to analyze the data. Finally, the interpretation of the data was held with the anthropological thinking about gender identity as it appears in anthropological views of dance and particularly in Hanna (1987, 1988).

From the analysis of the data it is observed that useful conclusions can be drawn about the position and attitudes of the woman in the dance through the photos, while taking into account the relevant literature. More specifically, from the study and analysis of the photographs we were given information: a) about the dancing occasion depicted, b) about the time of the dance, c) about the age of the dancers depicted and their social status, d) about the structure of the placement of the dancers in the dance circle, e) about the style of the dance, and f) about the behavior and attitudes of the women in the dance. These attitudes and behaviors of the women reflect social stereotypes, which have to do with the relations between the two genders, both in dance and in society in general.

Therefore, through iconography, the social stereotypes that reflect the roles of both genders in society can be highlighted. Specifically, from the study of the photographs in this paper, it was found that the position and the role of the woman was degraded before the 1960s. The woman in this period danced modestly and humbly, without improvisational creations and when she was placed in the first position of the dance, her hand was stretched down, a sign of her modesty, but also of her vassalage to the man. The degraded position of the woman in this period of time is perceived by the fact of her low gaze, but also by the male observer, who does not dance, but becomes the controller of her dance and therefore, by extension, of her honor. The role of the woman has been upgraded since the 1960s. The woman's hand goes up and rests on her waist and she can now dance in front of the man, with male observers rewarding this attitude. However, her gaze remains low, which demonstrates that even in this period there is inequality in the relationship between the two genders. The inequality of the two sexes is eliminated nowadays, where the woman leads the dance, improvises with freedom and is not controlled by anyone. Therefore, the role of women in society today is upgraded compared to previous periods and equal to that of men. This fact is perceived by the raising of her hand, by her placement in the dance circle and by her improvisational freedom.

Finally, through dance iconography one can study various parameters that exist in dance and which Seebas (1991) also mentioned, however, through dance iconography one can study social stereotypes, gender discriminations and social structures and therefore issues that have to do with the evolution of society over time. It would be interesting in a future research to investigate whether dance iconography can make conclusions about other, sociological concepts, such as cultural identity.

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**Eleni Filippidou** is a postdoctoral researcher at the School of Physical Education and Sport Science of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens with a scholarship from the Hellenic State Scholarship Foundation and Lecturer in the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences and Techniques of the French College Idef-Universite Paris13. She is a graduate of the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and holds a Postgraduate and Doctoral Degree in Folklore-Anthropology of Dance at the same university.